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House of Representatives

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CONSUMER CREDIT

September 12, 2006

The Honorable John Warner
Chairman
Senate Armed Services Committee
225 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Carl Levin
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
269 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Duncan Hunter
Chairman
House Armed Services Committee
2265 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Ike Skelton
Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee
2206 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Warner, Chairman Hunter, Ranking Member Levin, and Ranking Member Skelton:

As the conferees meet on the FY 2007 National Defense Authorization Act, we are writing to share with you the deep concerns of the Department of Defense and a broad range of religious groups to House language contained in Sect 590 of HR 5122 regarding military chaplains.

As the Office of the Secretary of Defense argues in its opposition to the provision, the current language would limit chaplain effectiveness and erode unit cohesion. The Chief of Chaplains from each service has asked to have this language removed. So have fifteen ecumenical groups representing the Episcopal, Jewish, Baptist, Evangelical Lutheran, Quaker, Unitarian Universalist, United Methodist, Sikh, Seventh-day Adventist and Presbyterian communities. The National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, which represents the vast majority of military chaplains and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, is also opposed to the language.

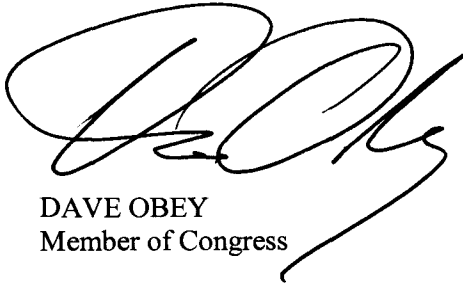
We believe all service members should have the right to pray where they want, how they want, when they want, and to whom they want. Unfortunately, some military authorities have insisted on using coercive practices to compel or discourage one religious belief over another. The most disturbing was a report from the Air Force Academy that a chaplain told cadets of different faiths that they "would burn in the eternal fires of Hell" unless they accepted his belief. Another military chaplain had publicly stated that his religious mission to convert others to his faith should not be compromised by the guidelines of the DoD.

The language in the House bill was clearly constructed to overturn existing DoD guidelines calling for sensitivity, tolerance and respect by military chaplains. In fact, during the HASC mark-up of HR5122 an attempt was made merely to amend the language with those very words -- sensitivity, tolerance and respect -- the amendment was defeated.

In response to various concerns, the Air Force has adapted its guidelines to guard against religious intolerance and we should respect the delicate balance at which they arrived. The Department of Defense already has standards for military chaplains and each service continues to update and implement relevant policies for chaplains as the need arises. Local commanders should exercise their authority to resolve these issues in accord with DoD guidelines and the need for unit cohesion. The current language undermines those DoD guidelines as well as unit cohesion.

That is why we join with the DoD, the Chiefs of Chaplains, the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Friends Committee on National Legislation, the General Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, the National Council of Jewish Women, the Presbyterian Church, the Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Interfaith Alliance, the Union for Reform Judaism, the United Methodist Church, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, and the Americans United for Separation of Church and State in asking you to oppose this language.

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.



DAVE OBEY
Member of Congress

Sincerely,



STEVE ISRAEL
Member of Congress